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## Conference Proceeding: Egypt's Military-Controlled Economy Beset with Monopolies, Corruption, and Social Unrest

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## **Conference Proceeding: Egypt's Military-Controlled Economy Beset with Monopolies, Corruption, and Social Unrest**

Mona Ibrahim

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Within the past six years, a new military regime took form in Egypt under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Officers and ex-officers have assumed full control, not only over the State apparatus, but also over the country's struggling economy. While officers manage a gigantic business empire that monopolizes various manufacturing and service sectors, ex-officers occupy the key bureaucratic positions in control of applying al-Sisi's accelerated economic liberalization scheme.

However, this military regime is evidently afflicted with incompetence, corruption, and lack of a social justice agenda, which resulted in the impoverishment of large segments of society and generated public discontent. With social unrest constantly on the rise, several waves of mass protests have erupted recently in the country. Bread riots, for example, broke out in early 2017 in reaction to sudden reductions in food subsidies. Immediately after al-Sisi's Minister of Supply—then an ex-army general—drastically reduced government support to the lower classes' staple foodstuff, the hungry masses took to the street in northern and southern provinces across the country. More recently, in September 2019, Mohamed Ali, a self-exiled contractor in Europe, published a series of viral videos on social media that scandalized the widespread corruption in military-owned construction firms and al-Sisi's family using the state budget to build many lavish palaces. Thousands of protesters flooded Tahrir Square in response to the contractor's call to depose al-Sisi and overthrow his military regime.

Since al-Sisi swept his first presidential election victory in 2014, his regime has applied drastic neoliberal policies that have especially hurt the lower classes, while allowing the ruling officers to expand unprecedented control over the economy; heavily securitize the urban milieu and cyberspaces; and hegemonically seize state-owned and private media alike to use for propaganda purposes. Such repressive conditions have inevitably generated acute episodes of public unrest. Various social groups express their restlessness through joining sporadic food riots, organising labour strikes, using social media to voice their reoccurring grievances, or engaging in spontaneous mass protests.

The army resorts to different means of combating dissent. For example, it uses violence by deploying the military police, applies heavy cyber surveillance measures over social media, or spreads propaganda about the officers' integrity, incorruptibility, patriotism, and entrepreneurial efficiency through the production of TV shows, songs, movies, etc. Alternatively, al-Sisi himself

appears in public to give extended speeches through conferences indoctrinating civilian youth, besides his occasional educational sessions for fresh army cadets. However, such tight grip of control does not seem to guarantee maintaining social stability in the country in the short term.

The article focuses on the recent history and current realities of the Egyptian military institution's control over the economy and its gigantic business empire. More importantly, it follows how the discontented lower and middle classes, whose livelihood has been severely hurt by profit-seeking, monopolistic, and corrupt practices of the ruling officers, have recently reacted to the unprecedented levels of control exerted by the military, within the past few years in particular. The article argues that the recent waves of protests, despite being spontaneous and sporadic, reflect the unsustainability of the military regime and its potential collapse to renewed mass uprisings in the foreseeable future.

### **The Recent History of 'Neoliberal Officers'**

Before 2011, the Egyptian military was an integral part of the authoritarian state of the country's previous military dictator, Hosni Mubarak (r. 1981-2011), especially at economic levels. Throughout the 1990s-2000s, Mubarak deeply militarised Egypt's partially liberalised market and the bureaucratic apparatus in charge of his economic reform policies. On the one hand, he allowed the military institution to expand a vast business empire that functioned with special privileges above both the private and the public sectors. On the other hand, Mubarak hired a large number of retired officers in top government positions in control of key economic services.

In terms of military business, a new class of 'neoliberal officers' was born in Egypt in the early 1990s, and expanded vastly through the 2000s. The Egyptian military executed a large-scale plan to convert considerable parts of its arms industry into producing civilian goods, and added new vast business enterprises to them. Thus, military factories that for decades used to produce serious ordnance such as ammunitions, missiles, aircrafts, rockets, explosives, pistols, and armours, were now heavily transforming their facilities and labour to produce consumer goods such as washing machines, fridges, TVs, kitchenware, home pesticides, fertilisers, and more. In addition, several army units and economic entities embarked on new profitable business enterprises in numerous sectors. Military entrepreneurs now produced almost everything in most sectors, from canned food to luxury cars, kitchen stoves, chemicals, steel, and cement – only to name a few. Moreover, they presented almost all types of public services for profit: they opened wedding halls, lavish hotels, supermarkets, fast-food restaurants, river transport firms, and more. They grabbed wide pieces of land to construct toll highways and collect their daily fees, and cultivated vast commercial farms and exported their produce. Moreover, they heavily influenced the daily life of the lower and the middle classes by baking and selling subsidised bread, building affordable flats, selling medicine, sponsoring popular sports, and more. Military business enterprises made big money, but they did not pay taxes or customs, were beyond public accountability, and outrageously violated labour rights.

In terms of the bureaucracy, while Mubarak maintained a civilian face for the government in Cairo by forming cabinets of technocrats; retired generals were the invisible de facto rulers of the country. Retired generals actually governed most of provincial Egypt, as they occupied seats of local governors, heads of towns, heads of neighbourhoods, etc. They also managed every sea, river, and land port, and dominated government authorities that provided all means of public transportation from buses and ferryboats to airlines. Moreover, they took charge of authorities that provided basic public services to the citizens, from water and sewerage and affordable housing to transportation. More importantly, ex-officers ushered Mubarak's swift transition to the market through running critical administrative posts in control of foreign investment; allotment of state land to private investors; export and import activities; state-owned holding companies that were to be privatized; and much more.

### **The 2011 Labour Uprisings against Military Control**

On the eve of the 2011 uprisings, public discontent was not only simmering against Mubarak, but also against the repressive hegemony of officers and ex-officers. Thus, while the uprisings erupted in Cairo's Tahrir Square, a parallel massive wave of labour and employee protests broke out against the military administrators in both business enterprises and government offices across the north and south of the country. The generals of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) seized power after the protests succeeded in deposing Mubarak, but they very soon had to face widespread labour strikes, sit-ins, and vigils in almost every economic enterprise owned by the military or government office controlled by ex-officers.

For example, chaos ensued at the Ministry of Military Production's (MoMP) sixteen military factories, as thousands of workers went on strike to demand fair wages, the punishment of corrupt managing officers, and the cessation of military trials for civilian workers. The situation was similarly boiling at the military-owned Arab Organization for Industrialization (AOI), a conglomerate of thirteen factories, as thousands of workers protested to demand a fair share in annual profits and also against corrupt managers. In bureaucratic offices, for example, employees at the 'New Urban Communities Authority' demanded a purge of all military administrators from this important public organisation, which implements state plans of building affordable housing. Against the militarisation of civil aviation and unfair wages, employees and labourers at Cairo International Airport and several other local and important airports embarked on widespread strikes. In firm reaction, military police intervened to disperse workers' sit-ins, and SCAF issued a law that prohibited labour strikes and sent violators to civilian and military trials.

When the Muslim Brotherhood took over power through parliamentary and presidential elections in 2011-2012, they formed a hidden alliance with the military and expanded its privileges. The Brotherhood continued Mubarak's tradition of appointing a large number of ex-officers in government positions and allowing the military business empire to expand further. Between 2012 and 2013, the economic failure of the Brotherhood's regime and social conservative repression diverted public attention from the officers and their now increasing but less visible

advantages. Thus, when mass protests erupted again in the country, this time against an Islamist authoritarian regime, the military posed as the only patriotic saviour of the nation and presented itself as the state's only incorruptible and competent institution to guard the country. The minister of defence, then Field Marshall al-Sisi, capitalised on public protests to depose the Islamist president, and shortly afterwards took over the presidential seat through ballot boxes in the summer of 2014.

### **A New Military Regime: Economic Reform, Poverty, and Protests**

Under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the autocratic and subsequently economic powers of officers and ex-officers have been widened and elevated to unprecedented levels. On the one hand, more retired generals have inundated key government positions in charge of managing the state budget and national economy. They have seized bureaucratic posts—to mention only a few—all the way from the head of the Suez Canal and its state-owned companies to the minister of foodstuff supply, minister of transportation, governor of Cairo, head of the public authority of agricultural development, under-secretary of the minister of housing, and many more. Moreover, they are the governors of most provinces in the south and north of the country, and heads of numerous small towns or large city districts. On the other hand, generals in uniform have tremendously expanded the monopolistic conglomerates of unaudited, untaxed military business enterprises, such as added commercial farms, pharmaceutical plants, gas stations, fisheries, cement and steel factories, food packaging mills, and more.

Most visibly, the military engineers of the 'Armed Forces Engineering Authority,' publicly known as al-Hay'a al-Handasiyya, has grown as the single largest, monopolistic, and unaccountable contractor in the country. The government allocates public construction projects, such as schools, hospitals, bridges, etc., to al-Hay'a al-Handasiyya outside open tenders, and these projects are executed above the monitoring authorities of the parliament or the national bureau of accountability. Al-Sisi amended the law of public tenders in 2013 and again in 2016 in order to allow such direct assignments of government projects to military conglomerates to take place above other public- and private-sector contractors. Al-Hay'a al-Handasiyya has recently undertook mega construction projects such as the digging of a Suez Canal extension, the building of thousands of social housing apartments, the construction of al-Sisi's new administrative capital, and founding several other new cities. Similarly, the army-owned Wataniyya Company for Road Construction and Development constructs and controls old and new toll highways that extend over thousands of miles across the country's north and south and collect high daily fees from civilian personal vehicles or trucks passing for personal or commercial purposes.<sup>1</sup>

Al-Sisi's mega building and real estate ventures executed by military contractors have recently fell under intense public scrutiny and fury, because of their waste of invaluable resources and lack of value to national economy. For example, al-Sisi assigned his over-ambitious project of digging a 'New Suez Canal,' an extension added to the old canal, to al-Hay'a al-Handasiyya. National banks issued investment certificates to sell to civilian citizens, and succeeded in

collecting LE64 billion (around \$9 billion) of their savings to fund the project. Al-Sisi ordered his top military contractor to complete the project within only one year, instead of the originally scheduled five years, which required tapping into the country's limited reserves of foreign currency to hire international sub-contractors and rent advanced equipment from them. Since its completion in 2015, the project has met little luck with generating income. On the one hand, inexperienced officers financially mismanaged it, as its high cost drained the country's reserve of foreign currency. The Egyptian Central Bank suffered a dollar shortage crisis as a result, and its head was sacked after asserting that the huge quantities of his bank's foreign currency were unnecessarily consumed in a short period. On the other hand, despite the regime's repeated promises of sizable increases, the canal's annual revenue declined as soon as the extension opened due to slower international trade.<sup>2</sup> The economic value of another mega construction project similarly executed by military contractors, the 'New Administrative Capital,' has also come under deep scrutiny recently. Economist Galal Amin asserts that this new city and many others are merely real estate investments, rather than long-term economic development ventures, mostly serving the upper classes in a 'hungry country.'<sup>3</sup>

For five years, al-Sisi's military regime opted for drastic economic liberalisation measures that aggravated different forms of dissent within many disadvantaged or marginalised social groups. Al-Sisi was encouraged by many allies in the international community, especially the United States, to complete the neoliberal transformations initiated by Mubarak in the early 1990s. Thus, between 2016 and 2019, the regime applied for and received in instalments an IMF loan of \$12 billion. The loan agreement entailed fixing the state's chronic budget deficit through substantial cuts in food and gas subsidies and other forms public spending, currency floating, the privatisation of the public sector, and more.

During the three years of applying to and receiving loan, the military regime hastily made many decisions to execute requested reforms. However, with almost every reform implemented by the government, lower-class civilians suffered and military-owned businesses took advantage of the situation to make big profits. The ruling officers were disturbingly selective about implementing the loan's conditions, in a way that severely hurt the lower classes and enhanced their wealth. In the following, the article shall highlight some instances of these practices that oftentimes led to protests or limited expressions of dissent.

One of the primary measures required for budgetary cuts was eliminating food subsidies, which the Egyptian government extended to its lower classes since the 1960s. Bread is the most essential staple food for the Egyptian society, and it had to suffer a staggering reduction in its subsidies. In early 2017, the Ministry of Supply, headed then by two ex-generals in a row, issued a sudden decision to decrease, by half, the number of cheap bread loaves that each lower-class family could buy at bakeries affiliated with the government. As a result, bread riots erupted across the country. While security forces dispersed the protests, social media activists hurried to call them "the supply riots" (intifadat al-tamwin), evoking memories of similar demonstrations over bread in 1977 that erupted against a similar IMF-pushed decision made by Sadat. Female and male protesters in provincial areas across the country chanted "We want to eat!" Meanwhile, the wealthy

military institution attempted to quell public rage by charitably distributing food packages to the poor from the production of its colossal commercial farms.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, an MoMP-owned firm for information technology took charge of creating the lists of beneficiaries of government subsidies and issuing them the electronic “supply smart card” that they should use to obtain their allocated ration of bread. MoMP is now in control of the digital system that decides each citizen’s share in subsidised bread.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the government decided to cut its decades-old subsidies for sugar by the end of 2017. Subsequently, the Egyptian lower classes suddenly encountered an acute crisis of sugar shortage. Subsidised sugar mysteriously disappeared from state-owned outlets, and standing in long lines marked oftentimes by violent quarrels in front of these outlets didn’t guarantee obtaining a package or two of sugar. The police arrested passersby caught carrying more than their family’s ‘legal’ share of it. Sugar eventually surfaced back on the market, after the military minister of supply doubled its price. Allegedly to help resolve the problem, the army confiscated sugar from private vendors and sold it at military-owned outlets. The governor of the city of Alexandria then, an ex-general, pledged to end the crisis that was caused— in his own words— by greedy private merchants. In the meantime, the military-owned al-Salam Company to Sell the Armed Forces’ Products sold thousands of tons of affordable sugar in the poor neighbourhoods of the large city.<sup>6</sup>

On the same day of the devaluation of the Egyptian pound in 2017, the military regime decided to almost double the gas prices. This was the first of many decisions that were taken within the past few years to gradually reduce and eventually altogether eliminate fuel subsidies. The Ministry of Defence owns a chain of gas stations widely spread at hundreds of locations on every road across the country. After the decision was issued, the fuel spots of the army’s Wataniyya Company for Petroleum were the only places where a truck driver could find cheap solar or a private car or affordable gas at difficult times of shortage, which usually came with long lines of waiting at other public or private stations that were mostly out of stock. Some youth organised a campaign to boycott the products of Wataniyya in order to protest high gas prices.<sup>7</sup>

Shortage in medicine was another tragic story that resulted primarily from the currency devaluation. The government decided to increase medicine prices by fifty per cent in January of 2017. Upon making the decision, the minister of health appointed an ex-general the chairman of the state-owned vaccines firm. But months before this, lower-class mothers woke up to a dire shortage of baby formula that had been previously subsidised by the government, and their anger instantly burst into wide-spread protests they engaged in while anxiously carrying their infants and waiting for hours in front of state outlets. Once more, the army posed as a patriotic saviour from the crisis by volunteering to import cans of the missing formula. The cans arrived much sooner than what an international shipment would normally take, and they were sold at a doubled price, which suggests that the military might have plotted the crisis to profit out of it. Moreover, MoMP vowed to help further by building its own factory of baby formula. The minister of defence signed an agreement with a local private firm to partner with in producing the formula.<sup>8</sup>

To meet another essential condition to the IMF loan, the military regime issued the Civil Service Law No. 81 also in 2017. This law aimed to reduce the number and lower the salaries of

government employees at the country's bloated bureaucratic apparatus. As the Egyptian parliament voted to pass this law, it passed another one that increased military pensions by fifteen per cent—which was not the first raise retired officers had received during the previous months. Furthermore, the parliament supported the creation of a new fund providing medical and social services to military judges. In the port city of Alexandria, some of these judges were then working on sending tens of workers at the army-owned Alexandria Shipyard to military jail for inciting a strike. In addition, despite seeking to shrink the size of the bureaucracy, Article no. 21 of the new civil service law reserved the authority to appoint officials in leadership positions to the president. This allows al-Sisi to place more ex-officers in top civilian jobs in the government and the public sector as soon as they retire from service, and they enjoy earning a new civilian salary next to their high retirement pension.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the impoverishment now faced by most of society, civilian workers employed in private, public, or military enterprises suffer from exacerbated repression. Their rebellious reaction is usually met with acute oppression. The military's hand-picked parliament passed a new trade union law that undermines years of labour struggle for freedom of organisation. The new law delegitimizes numerous autonomous unions that workers passionately established in the wake of deposing Mubarak in 2011, and it keeps existing unions under the authority of the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) that has dominated labour life for decades.

At military factories, striking workers faced more military trials. For example, the military trial of twenty-six workers at the Alexandria Shipyard— originally a state-owned company acquired by the army upon its privatisation a decade ago— dragged on for endless months. Including one woman, the workers were accused of inciting fellow workers to strike to demand better safety measures and fair wages, and many of them were already forced to resign from their jobs during the prosecution.<sup>10</sup>

### **Alleviating Poverty or Seeking Profit?**

During such hard times of acute economic suffering for the lower classes, the army resorted to poverty alleviation efforts in order to contain simmering discontent. Annually during the month of Ramadan, the army charitably distributes millions of food boxes in poor urban and rural areas across the country. Conscripted soldiers from various military branches pack food items including sugar, rice, beans, pasta, cooking oil, tomato paste, and tea in boxes that each carries the label of the Armed Forces' Supply Authority, along with that of TahyaMisr, al-Sisi's charitable fund. The military is able to provide such large food supplies from its massive farms that include numerous food processing mills and food export businesses, and it uses the free labour of hundreds of thousands of conscripted youth to both produce food and package the distributed boxes.<sup>11</sup> Under Mubarak, such food charities were a tool for civilian politicians to garner support ahead of parliamentary elections. They are now deployed as a tactic by the military to contain potential hunger riots.

In the coastal province of Kafr al-Shaykh, one of the areas where bread riots erupted, the military sold cheap food boxes in order to support the poor masses. Army soldiers packaged tens of thousands of boxes that each had a decent amount of sugar, rice, cooking oil, pasta, tomato paste, tea, etc. and sold them allegedly half-priced in lower-class neighbourhoods. In addition, thousands of local inhabitants crowded around the military trucks scattered across the province to sell cheap beef and poultry. At the same time, the army-owned Wataniyya Company for Fisheries inaugurated a large project in the province's rich Mediterranean shores, and in the process evacuated local fishermen from the area to take it over. Army soldiers violently clashed with poor fishermen, after preventing their civilian boats from sailing for their usual daily business. Gunfire was heard in the clashes. Welcoming the arrival of military company into his realm, the governor of Kafr al-Shaykh— then an ex-general— announced that this project was al-Sisi's gift to the Egyptian people. The military engineers took care of the construction needs of the project, including by building an industrial zone for fish freezing plants.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, as part of poverty alleviation endeavours, al-Sisi embarked on mega projects for social housing and land reclamation—all managed by military entrepreneurs. When al-Sisi initiated the 'One Million Apartments' project for social housing, it was an event that came with great festivities to celebrate lifting the lower classes out of their slums. As usual, the president directly assigned it to the al-Hay'a al-Handasiyyain in order to administer a large donation from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and collaborate with Emirati real estate firms. At the Ministry of Housing, an ex-general who chaired the ministry's Central Agency of Reconstruction pledged that thousands of families would soon benefit from improved housing conditions in Minya, a poor province in central Egypt where food riots erupted, and elsewhere. However, the project faced many problems that arose between the government and its UAE partners. Thus, the over-ambitious number of apartments to be built was reduced to only 100,000 units, and public discontent rose among the poor inhabitants of Minya and other provinces who clung to the officers' promises and strove to prepare their down payments to reserve small flats. Moreover, when al-Hay'a did deliver flats to some families in Minya, the recipients found them in poor condition and far from matching the description and construction quality they paid for.<sup>13</sup>

Al-Sisi assigned the "One Million and a Half Acres" agricultural project, aiming to help small farmers with land reclamation efforts, to the same military contractors of al-Hay'a al-Handasiyya. Promising great prosperity to youth who applied to receive tracts in this land, al-Sisi asked the military engineers to quickly finish digging water wells and constructing houses, clinics, schools, etc. in the developed areas. Numerous farmers in Qena, a poor province in south Egypt, were furious when they saw army soldiers coming to confiscate desert land they had already reclaimed and cultivated for decades. The farmers were evicted in order to annex their land to the project, and the army accused them of encroachment upon state property. The governor of Qena, an ex-general, used heavy loaders to demolish farmers' properties on a hundred thousand acres. Helpless civilian owners could only send complaints against this governor to Cairo's General Authority for Agricultural Development Projects— chaired then by yet another fellow ex-general. Interestingly, the ambitious project as a whole was shortly halted because of the lack of enough

will or river water to make sustain it. Apparently al-Sisi announced the project for propaganda purposes before making sure that the country had adequate resources to support it.<sup>14</sup>

The military regime also initiated the ‘Suez Canal Axis Development Project,’ in an attempt to assimilate unemployed labourers into a large public construction project. Once more, al-Hay’a al-Handasiyya took charge of this project, and they recruited skilled and unskilled workers to travel from various localities to serve on its site. Al-Sisi allegedly refused to rely on cheap Indian workers in the project, and asked the military engineers to create jobs for local workers at good wages. Al-Hay’a disseminated an inspiring video that interviewed tens of seasonal labourers getting out of a bus that just arrived at the construction site after a trip of more than a thousand miles from Qena province in the south. All interviewees expressed sentiments of honour to serve such a nationalist cause, and then stood in a long line to register their names at a table where an army officer sat to take them. Only a few days later, those very dejected labourers returned back to Qena, insisting that the military engineers didn’t offer them fair wages or even proper food or places to sleep at in the middle of the desert.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conspicuous Spending on Arms Procurement**

While cutting public expenditure on foodstuff to abide by the conditions of the IMF loan, Egypt’s ruling officers exhausted the state budget with multiplied spending on arms procurement. At the cost of billions of dollars, al-Sisi purchased weapons from the U.S. and several European states that were willing to deal with the new military president for mutual interests. In particular, he concluded large deals with France and Russia, and Germany came third on the list of his largest European suppliers. According to Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)’s 2016 report of ‘Trends in International Arms Transfers,’ Egypt was the eleventh largest importer of major weapons globally between 2012 and 2016. The World Bank’s aggregates indicate that these imports increased from \$675,000,000 in 2013 to \$1,483,000,000 in 2016. They grew by sixty-nine per cent during these recent years. Egypt is currently the largest client of France, and it also signed many large arms deals with Russia. Germany “quintupled” its arms sales to Egypt and Saudi Arabia—a main regional backer of al-Sisi—with deals worth hundreds of millions of Euros.<sup>16</sup>

From France alone, al-Sisi struck deals worth two billion Euros. The bad news is that the Ministry of Defence did not pay for those arms for itself from the accumulated revenue of its commercial activities, but rather it took loans from French banks. France has been by far the largest supplier of weapons to Egypt, with the sale of the 24 Rafale aircrafts, followed by Mistral warships. The French government lent Egypt a loan of 3.2 billion Euros to conclude the Rafale contract in 2015.<sup>17</sup> Al-Sisi visited Paris in late 2017 and was received by the newly elected president then, Emanuel Macron. As journalist Jenna Le Bras explained in a report published at the Cairo-based Mada Masr, “[t]he relationship between the two countries in recent years has centred on military and security cooperation and counterterrorism, while France has turned a blind eye to Egypt’s worrying human rights record. Macron defended this position during Sisi’s visit, saying it is not

his place to 'lecture' Egypt on civil liberties."<sup>18</sup> The agreement of the Mistral helicopter carrier cost Egypt about \$1 billion.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

In September 2019, thousands of protesters took to the street in Tahrir Square, the historic site of the 2011 uprisings, and several other squares outside Cairo in southern and northern provinces. Women and men from the country's lower and middle classes responded to an unusual call to depose al-Sisi that was initiated by the self-exiled contractor Mohamed Ali, who posted a series of viral videos on social media that scandalized the deeply entrenched corruption in the military regime. While the ruling officers applied drastic economic austerity policies that squeeze the country's increasingly impoverished lower classes, the military dictator uses state budget to build lavish palaces for his family, as the contractor asserts with evidence from his involvement in the construction of some of these residences. Furthermore, he reveals that the military engineers of al-Hay'a a-Handasiyya grew into the conspicuously largest, monopolistic, and corrupt contractors of public construction projects, which allows them to accumulate immense wealth from illicit profit. With unprecedented popularity to a civilian with no background in political activism before, the exiled small contractor succeeded in mobilising thousands of fellow discontented citizens to storm public squares to demand al-Sisi's abdication and the fall of the military regime.<sup>20</sup>

For the past five years, al-Sisi and the Egyptian military fully controlled the economy and applied policies that allowed the ruling officers to accumulate wealth, and generated acute discontent among the increasingly destitute middle and lower classes. Despite the apparent political stability of the regime, social instability has been the hidden and denied reality. Simmering unrest led to occasional protests, but they remained limited due to the heavy level of urban and cyber securitization and public fear from the regime's violent backlash. Although it seems unlikely that the military would abandon its superior political and economic status over the country, growing public unrest might force it to partially or fully do so in the near future.

## Acknowledgements

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